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Seeing Through their Eyes: Empowering Grassroots Women in their Search for Economic and Political Development

By Diana Ibarra¹, Natalia Stengel²

Abstract (English)

Women's empowerment faces different challenges depending on the socio-political context. In Mexico, a country with several gender gaps, grassroots women face more obstacles than women in urban zones. However, instead of assuming the main obstacles that prevent rural women's social and political empowerment in rural zones, we asked them directly. From July until December 2014, we undertook a six-month social research project that included 20 focus groups and 51 interviews in 10 different Mexico municipalities. Our primary purpose as women and researchers was to provide tools for catalyzing women's empowerment in pre-selected Mexican communities. Inserted into the Capabilities Approach, our research aimed to promote the idea of agency as defined by Amartya Sen: "being free to do and achieve whatever goals or values a person sees as important" (Sen 1985, p. 203). Other theoretical insights from the Capabilities Approach we considered were those by Martha Nussbaum, Solava Ibrahim, and Stanley Sharaunga. We worked under the aegis of the *Red Mujeres, Desarrollo, Justicia y Paz*, one of the branches of *Unión Nacional Integradora de Organizaciones Solidarias y Economía Social A.C.* (UNIMOSS), a Nation-wide Mexican NGO devoted to promoting human development among grassroots and indigenous populations. This NGO has been working for more than thirteen years to empower women; however, before our intervention, there was no research about the effects of their work. The project's financing was thanks to the *Proequidad* Program (INMujeres), which conducted the bidding process, which we won.

Keywords: Women empowerment, Rural women in Latin America, Gender equality

Abstract (Spanish)

El empoderamiento femenino supone diferentes retos dependiendo el contexto sociopolítico. En México, un país con múltiples brechas de género, las mujeres del entorno rural enfrentan más obstáculos que aquellas en zonas urbanas. Sin embargo, en lugar de suponer cuáles

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son los principales obstáculos que limitan el empoderamiento político y social de las mujeres en las zonas rurales, les preguntamos directamente. De julio a diciembre de 2014, llevamos a cabo un proyecto semestral de investigación social que incluyó 20 grupos focales y 51 entrevistas en 10 municipios Mexicanos distintos. Nuestro objetivo general, como mujeres e investigadoras, fue el brindar las herramientas catalizadoras del empoderamiento de las mujeres en las comunidades mexicanas seleccionadas. Nuestra investigación se inserta en la Teoría de las Capacidades por lo que promovimos la idea de agencia definida por Amartya Sen como: “ser libre para decidir cómo actuar en pos de cualquiera objetivos y valores que considere importantes” (2008, p. 85). Otras perspectivas teóricas sobre la Teoría de las Capacidades que consideramos fueron la de Martha Nussbaum, Solava Ibrahim y Stanley Sharaunga. Nuestro trabajo de investigación formó parte de las labores que realiza la Red Mujeres, Desarrollo, Justicia y Paz A.C., una de las organizaciones de la Unión Nacional Integradora de Organizaciones Solidarias y Economía Social A.C. (UNIMOSS), una organización civil mexicana con presencia nacional comprometida con la promoción del desarrollo humano en poblaciones rurales y originarias. Esta organización civil ha trabajado el empoderamiento femenino desde hace más de trece años, sin embargo, antes de nuestra intervención, no existía un diagnóstico que les permitiera conocer los efectos de su trabajo. El proyecto fue financiado a través del Programa Proequidad (INMujeres) a cuya convocatoria aplicamos y fuimos seleccionadas.

Palabras clave: Empoderamiento femenino, Mujeres rurales en América Latina, Igualdad de género

Introduction

“That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.”

- John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women*

Empowering people is one of the many challenges we must face to construct an equitable and sustainable world. All human beings deserve to have dignity, recognition of their essential freedom, and opportunities to develop their capabilities. They also need to be made conscious of the critical ability they have to increase the quality of life in their communities. Unfortunately, this process is frequently constrained by centuries of social and cultural obliviousness which replicates gender, class, ethnic, and economic inequalities. Based on the ENIGH (for its name in Spanish, National Survey of Household Income) of 2016, Mexico's income inequality is like of other Latin American countries. However, it is higher than in other OECD countries (Lambert and Park, 2019, p. 1). Since 2004, Mexico has kept the Gini coefficient of .45, resulting in what Lambert and Park stated: “contrary to the declining trend observed in other countries in the region, income inequality in Mexico has barely changed since 2004, despite a drop in poverty” (2019, p. 1). Translated into social reality, this means that “the 20% richest households have an income ten times higher than the poorest 20%” (Lambert and Park, 2019, p. 5). Many women and men follow paths that have been preconceived for them, tracing their goals, establishing their routines, planning their futures and outlining a view of themselves based in incongruent standards. In this regard, women have experienced the most significant disparities, especially grassroots women.

Our main purpose as women and researchers was to provide tools for catalyzing women's empowerment in pre-selected Mexican communities under the aegis of the *Red Mujeres, Desarrollo, Justicia y Paz*, one of the branches of *Unión Nacional Integradora de Organizaciones Solidarias y Economía Social A.C.* (UNIMOSS)³, a Nation-wide Mexican NGO devoted to promoting human development among grassroots and indigenous populations. From July until December 2014, we designed a program oriented towards visualizing and strengthening women's critical roles in society, elaborating a diagnosis of Mexican women's main challenges and obstacles in rural areas to awake, expand, and recognize women's leadership capacity. Following the Capabilities Approach, we wanted to bring philosophical ideas to this project.

This text follows the structure of how the research was conducted and highlights grassroots women's identity and their empowerment process. Additionally, it addresses the political framing of gender perspectives and the development of women's leadership in both strategic actions we conducted.

Context

It is not possible to consider the best future in development if we do not commit to creating flourishing environments for all. By the time we conducted the research and, according to the National Plan for Development 2013-2018, most impoverished homes in Mexico were in rural areas⁴ (2013, pp. 44-45). In 2017, 17.4% of the rural area's houses lived in extreme poverty conditions (a reduction of 9.1% in relation to 2010). However, 40% remained in moderate poverty (FAO, 2018, p. 8). These numbers would change due to the COVID-19 pandemic as CONEVAL reported that, in June 2020, the extreme poverty line increased 6.4% for the rural areas and 5.6% for the urban ones (this concerning the value of the basket of foodstuff) (2020). Moreover, the feminization of poverty has made it a cruder presence for women and their families. The Mexican government had established several actions to promote women's human development and reduce gender gaps, with a particular interest in grassroots women. One of the most important initiatives is the national program *PRO-Equidad* (Pro-equity), established by the *Instituto Nacional de las Mujeres* (aka in Spanish, National Institute for Women)⁵. The main objective is to facilitate economic aid and collaborate with civil society organizations to promote sustainable equality and eliminate discrimination against women. More than dictating a particular method, *INMujeres* is deeply engaged in collaborative work. It is acknowledged that feminist and women's organizations are the principal agents responsible for cultural change in favor of women's rights in our country because of their proximity with communities and their knowledge of their circumstances. Their role was recently highlighted by the CEDAW in 2018, in which it asked the government to strengthen the involvement of women's organizations to eradicate gender violence and inequality (ONUMujeres, 2018, D.10). There is a correspondence between the *INMujeres* and Amartya Sen's proposal: "Civil society organizations, even if they are not overtly political, can therefore provide the building blocks with which their members may engage with the political processes in the future, if they are willing to" (Sen, 2011, p. 88).

³ The acronym of the NGO's name makes a reference to the Spanish word *unimos*, which means to put together or join; this is related to the objective of the NGO of working together to improve human conditions in equality.

⁴ In Mexico, 65% of the people living in rural areas are considered poor. This tendency decreases to 40.5% in urban areas (SEGOB, pp.44-45).

⁵ The program was established in 2002. According to the *INMujeres* website the information and objectives of the program have remained the same since 2018. Nevertheless, there are some adjustments taking place due to the government that was elected 2 years ago. There was a budget cut of 75% to the federal resources of *INMujeres* which will deeply impact programs like *PRO-Equidad* (Mendoza, 2020).

In this sense, working with *UNIMOSS* was a privilege for us. For more than thirteen years, this organization has been in touch with community leaders, managing productive projects, financing education, and promoting gender equality. According to Rocio Bedolla, Chief Manager of the *Red Mujeres*, an increasing number of female leaders appeared over the past few years. However, they had not identified the main challenges and opportunities these women faced in their communities. Inspired by the words contained in the Beijing Platform for Action:

Women have demonstrated considerable leadership in community and informal organizations, as well as in public office. However, socialization and negative stereotyping of women and men, including stereotyping through the media, reinforces the tendency for political decision-making to remain the domain of men (1995, §183).

We decided to undertake a six-month social project oriented to propose a grassroots initiative for women in Mexico based on their economic and political expectations. The *Proequidad* Program conducted the bidding process, which we won. We intended to see through their eyes and hear their proposals instead of assuming preconceived solutions about their needs. We wanted to acknowledge their capabilities, "the alternative combinations of things a person is able to do or be" (Sen, 1993, p. 271). We wanted to understand them in the sense of combined capabilities.⁶ Our objective was what not to tell them what to do, but to learn from them. Many of the previous social interventions from other initiatives adhered to neo-colonial logic, and some were unrealistic and violent because they perpetuated a vertical social dynamic from urban to rural dwellers and from bureaucrats to beneficiaries. Conversely, we built support networks. This approximation is inscribed in other efforts proposed from the Capabilities Approach. In 2014, Solava Ibrahim coordinated research that explored the collaborative development of women's capabilities towards reducing gender inequalities or eradicating a serious problem. Her research focused on eradicating female genital mutilation (FGM), while ours was focused on promoting political and social empowerment. However, as it will be observed, these kinds of projects provide women with a sense of self-fulfillment, enable them to gain more skills, and understand their communitarian role (2014, pp. 59-50). While Ibrahim observed that men are an obstacle for women advocating against FGM, ours looked for inclusion. We endorsed a gender-based perspective that focused on women and men, acknowledging men as key players in transforming patriarchal social mindsets.

Identity and Empowerment

Full comprehension of self-identity construction's complex process requires integrating the public and private spheres, individuality and collectiveness, the inside and the outside, and the necessary and pertinent. Specifically, talking about women's identity and their recognition as essential components of overall human well-being, we can encounter an "epic memory of destruction and fights without pauses" (Pereda 1995, p. 207)⁷. Women's development should

⁶ We assumed the definition of combined capability as described in Martha Nussbaum's book: "To realize each one of the items on the list entails not only promoting appropriate development of people's internal powers, but also preparing the environment so that it is favorable for the exercise of practical reason and the other major functions" (Nussbaum, 2000, p.34).

⁷ Original translation by the author. The quote in Spanish is: "memoria de una épica de desgarramientos y luchas sin pausas".

become a smooth and enjoyable process delivered without social unrest. Although, during this study, we could observe a significant change of patterns, women's recognition is still a struggle for many. As Martha Nussbaum stated, all too often, "woman is treated not as an end in itself, but as an adjunct or instrument of the needs of others, as a mere reproducer, cook, cleaner, sexual outlet, caretaker, rather than a source of agency and worth in her own right" (2000, p. 243).

The social imaginary, confabulated with years of submission, established traditional societies where two different norms are reinforced to distribute activities among men and women (Annas, 1993), which frequently have reproduced inequalities compromising human capability development. This *habitus*⁸ narrows the sighted women, creating a limited view of themselves linked with the ability to make choices.

Personal and human identity are not just expressions of what was innately contained in them, but an uninterrupted configuration reinforced by daily experiences (Ibarra, 2019). In one way or another, every thought, action, and word contribute to the self-construction process:

The fear of death, the love of play, relationships of friendship and affiliation with other, even the experience of the bodily appetites - these never turn up in simply the vague and general form, but always in some specific and historically rich cultural realization, which can profoundly shape not only the conceptions used by the citizens in these areas but their experiences themselves. (Nussbaum 1992, 224)

During the period we spent in their communities conducting interviews, we found that the frequency, intensity, associative process, and agency surrounding a particular experience modify how women read the world (Ibarra, 2019). Being beaten once is different from being beaten every day, although both cases are reprehensible. An aspect of finding a good job may be so intense that it modifies the whole perception of future planning. Additionally, when a sense of support and recognition accompanies a particular moment, there is a positive associative process that links self-knowledge to what one deserves. Agency is the discovery of being free to do and achieve whatever goals or values a person sees as important (Sen 1985, p. 203). Based on Sen's definition of agency and the relation between the Capabilities Approach and Human Development, Ingrid Robeyns provides her conceptualization: "...that people have the freedoms (capabilities) to lead the kind of lives they want to lead, to do what they want to do and be the person they want to be" (2017, p. 195). Her perspective supposes a leading role of the subjects; it is not about imposing an agenda but about facilitating self-help initiatives. For this, Robeyns referenced Ibrahim who is involved in women's projects that start from a recognition of who they are and what they need: "self-help initiatives can play a crucial role in promoting the capabilities of the poor, by enhancing their ownership of development projects and 'overcoming their helplessness by changing their perception of their own capabilities'" (referenced by Robeyn, 2017, p. 180). Hence, we understood that this experience is not only lived but integrates a grid of what is possible for them, what is not, and which is the most common response of their community, related to their decision-making.

Our vision of human and women's identity is very similar to what Sen asserts about the relationship between capabilities and the Greek word *dunamis* (1993, p. 285). We assume that the human condition has the "possibility of existing" in a certain way, that has a non-negotiable value which demands responsibility for creating the best environment possible for functioning

⁸ We understand the word *habitus*, as proposed by Bourdieu and Wacquant, as "the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them" (1992, p. 316).

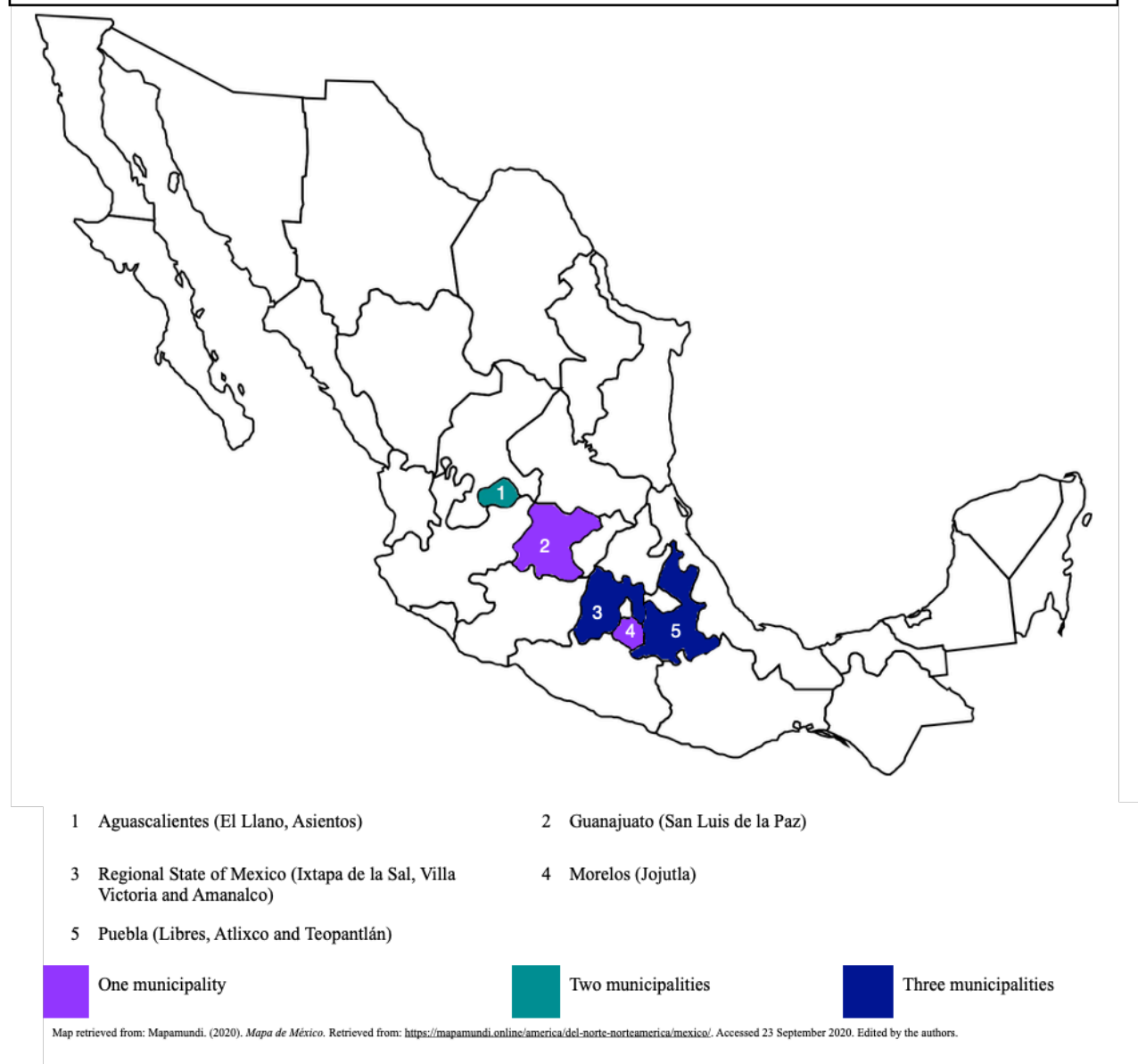
(Nussbaum, 2011). In our practice with most of the cases, this cultural inertia causes disparities between men and women and their development; the gender gap is assimilated without malice and is unconscious of its counter-productive implications. Men and women face social constructions made by their communities that are assumed as natural. We surmised that it is possible for a transformation of mentalities that acknowledge the agency of people. Mainly, we subscribed to the understanding of empowerment as: "the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices, acquire such an ability" (Kabeer, 2005, 13). As a result, we decided to be facilitators of this personal procedure without being involved in a training process.

Methodology

This project was made possible due to the generous investment of human capital that UNIMOSS has amassed for 13 years. Three main components were the basis of our sample population: (1) being a rural municipality with low human development; (2) having been a beneficiary of a previous social program managed by *UNIMOSS*;⁹ and (3) having a presence of women leaders. Taking this into account, we located ten municipalities from five different states: Puebla, Guanajuato, Aguascalientes, Morelos, and the Regional State of Mexico.

⁹ Although during the project, we also have the presence of first contact population with the UNIMOSS organization.

Fig I. Map of the municipalities we worked in



Later, we analyzed the particular state of development each community had, always with the gender perspective. By the time we organized the focus groups, a significant number of women in these states did not receive a salary (INEGI, 2010)¹⁰. In 2015, 28.7% of Mexican women 15 or older did not earn any money. From the 71.3% women with an income, 40% depended on government support (INMujeres, 2016). We interpret this as a lack of autonomy and economic empowerment, which could influence the decision-making process, the acquisition of goods and properties, and women's political representation. In respect to illiteracy, things have improved, and

¹⁰ According to INEGI (the National Institute of Statistics and Geography) there is an increasing number of occupied women that do not receive a salary. At that time in Puebla there were 185,448, in the Estado de México 229,445, in Aguascalientes 11,364, in Guanajuato 88,752, and in Morelos 29,019 women.

the gender gap has disappeared. By 2017, 99.2% of women could write and read and 99.1% of men (INMujeres and INEGI, 2018, p. 92). Nevertheless, not everything is fixed; when the research was conducted, the state of Puebla showed that 12% of women were illiterate (INEGI, 2010). In 2017, two of the states where we worked had more women than men in schools (Aguascalientes and Morelos); meanwhile, in Guanajuato, 88.9% of women were studying in comparison to 89.4% of men and, in Puebla, 89.6% women go to school compared to 92.2% of men (INMujeres and INEGI, 2018, p. 93). This educational gender-gap invokes a decrease of agency amongst women since it diminishes the capability to identify, analyze, and construct development opportunities. Another significant problem that our target population faced was violence. According to the ENDIREH 2016¹¹, the Regional State of Mexico (75.3% of women were victims of violence) and Aguascalientes (73.3% of women were victims of violence) have the most extensive presence of intimate domestic violence, which, unfortunately, we could witness.

To extrapolate our diagnosis, we planned to follow three different social research methods:

Focus Group: Twenty focus groups were established: 10 for women and 10 for men; two for each municipality. A questionnaire was presented to the attendees regarding the work division, the access to education for girls, the economic opportunities in the communities and women's political participation. The groups were divided by gender to encourage active listeners and a communal compromise in a secure and trust-creating environment. In the women's focus group, we aimed to identify the particular obstacles women had to face in reaching empowerment. As Sharaunga, et al. pointed out, we aimed “to search for more effective methods to support people and communities in ways that are more meaningful to their daily lives and needs, as opposed to ready-made interventionist instruments” (2018, p. 3). The groups were invited to consider new opportunities and visualize which of themselves could be a social or political leader through peer recognition dynamics. In the men's focus group, we intended to stimulate a critical self-evaluation that would encourage them to identify themselves as crucial agents for promoting women's leadership (Ibarra, 2016). We invigorated considerations regarding their own household dynamics, social involvement, and participation in cleaning and care activities. The quantitative results were also qualitatively analyzed, allowing us to determine the answers' relevance and frequency. According to the different geographical zones, this data was compared with the collective imaginary observed in the groups.

Life Stories: We wanted to visualize the women's leadership presence in their own communities. For that reason, we established a procedure of selection in two ways. First, we asked *UNIMOSS'* leaders from each municipality to identify who were the most active and prominent women of their community. Second, we observed the women's performance in the focus group and requested those who seemed more empowered if they agreed to be interviewed. We conducted 50 interviews with women leaders. We ensured that the interviews took place in tranquil and private environments, to promote harmonious rapport and generate the necessary confidence to obtain reliable data.

Academic Research: Due to the time granted—six months to recover all the data and do the analysis—the data retrieved was operationalized and converted into statistics from which we wrote a comparative analysis for all the towns with which we had been working. The data permitted us to identify the conditions that may help women develop their capabilities and be empowered. It let

¹¹ The ENDIREH is the Encuesta Nacional sobre las Dinámicas de las Relaciones en los Hogares (National Survey on Household Relationship Dynamics).

us present recommendations to the communities through an open forum in which we presented a small brochure with the 30 authentic most inspirational women's life stories. We also presented the results to the National Institute for Women. However, after submitting the project to INMujeres we kept interpreting and analyzing the data. We presented the results in different academic events, either in Mexico and in the United States of America, and from the discussion our analysis has been enriched. Derived from the field research, we published a magazine detailing some of the most significant stories we got from the interviews. All the copies were distributed on different forums, some with rural women, at United Nations, and in academic meetings. We had two objectives with this magazine: to recognize exemplary women and to inspire others.

The combination of these methods allowed us to show a more complex view of women's circumstances; "In general, qualitative methods that use in-depth, unstructured or semi-structured interviews are more suitable than purely quantitative methods in identifying socio-cultural and religion, norms and values that define gender relations in a society" (Akter, et al. 2017).

Wonderful Stories in Standard Settings

One of the main obstacles that needs to be addressed regarding human development is combining the growth of substantive opportunities, resources, capabilities, and human recognition with genuine respect for autonomy, agency, and identity. The objective should not impose the same development model upon every woman and man around the world but enable each to find their own. At times, it is a matter of accompanying decisions; meanwhile, on other occasions, it is offering a platform to share our thoughts, hoping they can be helpful. Culture changes, but that change must come from the people's perspective in their particular moment and context. We did not endorse most of the attitudes and actions we observed. Our aim was only to distinguish which were the main challenges and obstacles women face in rural environments to be empowered.

Outcomes in the Focus Groups

The focus groups were critical to identifying the adopted mentality regarding women's roles for the community. A total of 349 people participated in focus groups: 203 women and 146 men. Albeit *Unimoss* has a larger presence of men within their beneficiaries, the call to participate in the project elicited lower participation by men, mainly because of the research topic; suggesting the resistance the men of these communities still have regarding women's empowerment. We could also sense this through the discomfort the women's group had in Villa Victoria (Regional State of México), where they felt insecure talking about women's rights out of fear of retaliation from men in their communities. They were significantly silent when the men's focus group was simultaneously held next to theirs. We confirmed one of the obstacles for human development mentioned by Nussbaum: "Violence, and fear of being violated, is still one of the most prominent obstacles for human capability development. Emotional capability should be developed free from fears and anxieties" (Nussbaum 2000, p. 79). Although this incident reveals many men's mentality in Mexican culture, it is important to say that most of the men's participation in the project was eager and showed commitment.

Most people in focus groups were between 30 and 50 years old. This age group allowed us to observe the effects of globalization, communication technologies, and feminist and women's movements. Older generations tended to be more traditional. Younger ones had two primary responses: an un-specific definition of women empowerment; and the other showed a meaningful change in thoughts about access to education and employment opportunities.

As an introductory activity that provided us with reliable answers, we conducted a "T" dynamic asking both groups,¹² men and women, what behaviors, values, and activities were considered feminine or masculine. In most of the groups, we received gender-based stereotypical

Fig. 2. Most Common Answers Associated with being a Woman (results from both genders "T" dynamics)

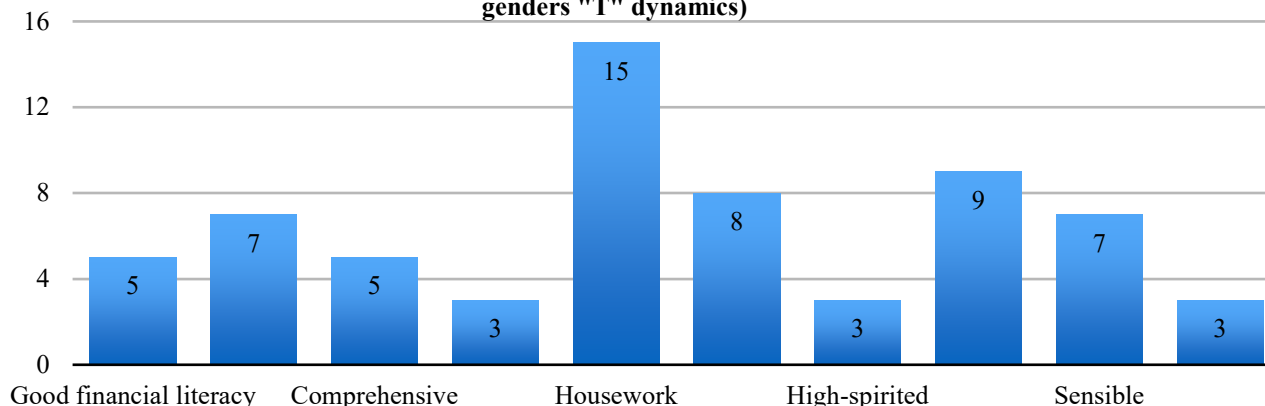
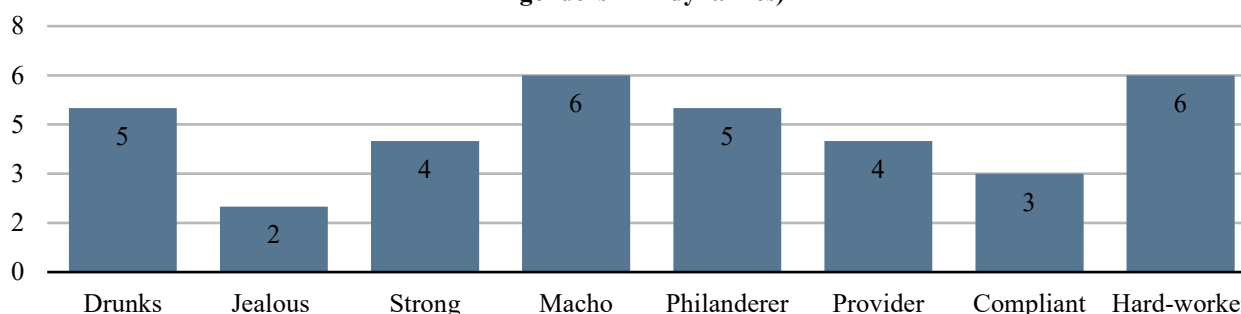


Fig. 3. Most Common Answers Associated with being a Man (results from both genders "T" dynamics)



answers; fifteen of the twenty focus groups believed that "taking care of the house" was women's responsibility. Therefore, it is justifiable to promote gender equality concerning household chores.

On the other hand, the behaviors, values, and activities most commonly associated with being a man were "macho" (close in meaning to chauvinistic or sexist) as they were frequently mentioned as hard workers. Additionally, negative behaviors were more often associated with masculinity; this disturbed us as it may justify violent conduct as a natural manly behavior inscribed in gender stereotypes and fixed tendencies. Another alarming signal that recurred during the initiative and the focus groups was a reiterative allusion to alcohol consumption in relation to violence; hence, we observed that pending matters related to gender discrimination became more critical when alcoholism was involved.

Another topic we were interested in was education. In this aspect, we could trace a significant difference between the family norms given to women and men. From the interviewed women, 75% declared that their homes' rules were not the same for the girls and the boys when they were children. Meanwhile, men expressed that they sensed that their family attitudes were less caring and more demanding with them, but that they had more freedom when they became adults.

¹² The dynamic consists in creating a comparative chart based on the answers of the participants. In this case we asked them to list activities which were proper for men and for women.

Regarding women's right to formal education, most women and men said they had the same educational opportunities. Furthermore, the general perception in the groups exhibited a sense of changing patterns favoring women. Concerning the question asked to men about "If it was important to give the same educational opportunities for girls and boys," 75% answered affirmatively, 12.5% were indifferent, and 12.5% declared that it depended on the circumstances. When we asked them, "Why was it important for women to continue with their studies?", the following four were the most common answers: (1) "because they are necessary for Mexico's progress"; (2) "because then they could get a good job"; (3) "because they would have the tools to defend themselves"; and (4) "because they have an important role to play."

It is relevant to highlight that the women from Amanalco were the ones with deeper educational handicaps. Many of them were illiterate and felt profound shame because of it. One of them expressed this issue regarding her peers: "they did not feel confident to participate in the public sphere; they thought it was better to stay at home." When we asked them, which actions would be necessary for women's empowerment, almost all of them said being capable of reading and writing. Though there was an educational gap between generations, the quality of life in these communities confirmed Kickbusch's hypothesis: "High levels of illiteracy contribute significantly to the disease burden of poor communities and countries and reinforce health and economic inequalities" (Kickbusch, 2001). In contrast, women from Asientos affirm that today women possess more opportunities than before and, therefore, they encourage their daughters and sons equally to have the best education possible. Men in San Luis de la Paz declared that they invested less in girls' education because they were going to get married at some point in their lives; thus, formal education was unnecessary. However, Atlxco presented a valuable example because three young women in the group had left their paternal home to continue their professional education. As such, they declared having experienced discrimination from other women within their family, getting claims and complaints about their confidence, moral life standards, and liability. None of them had any regret about abandoning their family house, as they considered studying fundamental for them and a source of empowerment which benefited themselves and their families. Today, their relatives are proud of them and encourage their future career-life plans.

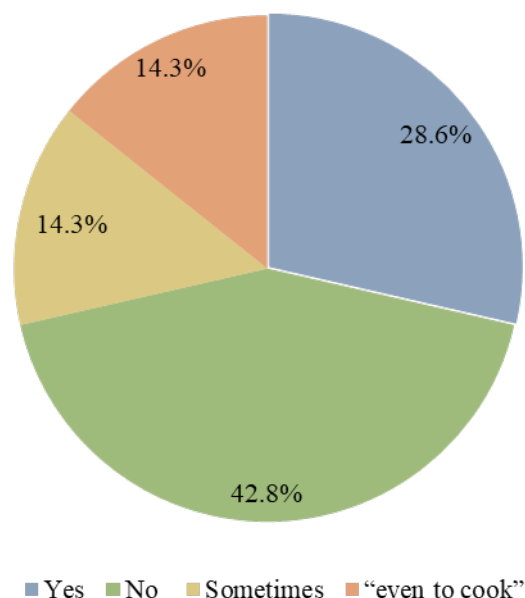
Another aspect we asked about was the house dynamics. We enquired during the women's focus group if a woman had to ask for permission to leave her house. The majority, 42.8%, declared they do not, 28.6% affirmed they do, 14.3% answered that it depended on where they were going, and 14.28% expressed that they ask for permission even for their ordinary labor such as "as to decide what to cook." Many women declared that "asking for permission" was not the same as "letting others know what they are doing." In many municipalities, we could confirm that "asking for permission" was a relatively common practice, especially regarding recreational activities. When we asked the men's focus group the same question, 50% affirm that "women should ask for permission to leave the house," confirming our suspicions about the present submission of women in rural environments. Needless to say, we could sense a feeling of discomfort when this question was raised. Women in Jojutla expressed that only independent economic women do not have to ask for permission, which showed us the correlation between two basic capabilities: economic empowerment and freedom.

Concerning the question, "Who should be the primary wage-earner?" 42.8% of women answered "men", and 57.2% affirmed both men and women. When we posited the same question to the men's group, 44.4% declared it was their responsibility, 44.4% answered both, and 11.2% alleged that women were responsible. Significantly, no woman asserted this as her responsibility, although the number of female-lead households is rising in México (INEGI, 2015).

It is relevant to highlight that the selected municipalities presented a low Human Development Index (HDI). The Mexican IDH average is 0.669. Three of the municipalities where we worked are among the ten populations with the country's lowest IDH. These are (1) Teopantlán, Puebla with 0.425, (2) El Llano, Aguascalientes with 0.661, and (3) Asientos, Aguascalientes with 0.662 (UNPD, 2014). Poverty¹³ is a harsh reality for these populations, and it is essential to remember that habitually: "Poverty and disempowerment generally go hand-in-hand because an inability to meet one's basic needs – and the resulting dependence on powerful others to do so – rules out the capacity for meaningful choice" (Kabeer 2010, 14).

When we queried the groups about the perception, they have regarding labor opportunities among women and men, 61.42% of women answered both have the same options. On the contrary, 50% of men affirmed that women have more opportunities; this was particularly interesting because the perception was based on the number of social support programs oriented toward women. Also, men identified more diverse labor options for women in rural sectors without any certificate. They could cook, wash clothes for others, make crafts, and be housemaids in the big cities. These employment options are informal and sporadic. In San Luis de la Paz, the men affirmed that they could not answer this question because "their women did not work", and this was conceded with a sense of pride.

Fig. 4. Women Asking Permission to Leave Home



As of what refers to income, when asked "What do men feel when they have a lower income than women?" the majority stated that the men respond with unhealthy attitudes such as low self-perception, envy, anger, laziness, or violent behavior. Paradoxically, when we asked the men on "what women spent their money", 50% declared it was for household needs, 33.33% asserted it contributed to child support, 8.33% said it was spent on food, and 8.33% admitted that they pay for few luxuries with it. We could verify that women from the focus groups who earned their own

¹³ We understand poverty as Fukuda-Par described it: "Poverty can be defined as the denial of the opportunities and choices most basic to human life -the opportunity to lead a long, healthy, and creative life, and to enjoy a decent standard of living, freedom, dignity, self-esteem, and respect from others" (Fukuda-Parr, 1999, p. 100).

money developed the following capabilities: administrative skills, forward-looking attitudes, and excellent saving techniques. Some men declared that their resistance to women's labor participation resulted from their jealousy and fear of losing family authority.

Regarding men's involvement in household chores, 57% of women affirmed that they received help from other family members, 28% recognized their partners' partial involvement, and 14.8% declared that they were in charge. When we asked men if they provided any assistance at home, 75% stated that they collaborate on these activities, pointing out an apparent inconsistency between the men's and women's perception. Furthermore, many men admitted that, even though they knew the significance of their participation at home, they would not like other men to know about this. Based on these results, we stressed the importance of familiar co-responsibility for household chores to guarantee women have enough time for leisure, development activities, and rest. It was also very stimulating to hear that men's recommendations for their daughters were to first concentrate on their studies and, secondly, on home chores.

To conclude with the focus groups' results, in almost every group (9/10), we identified at least one woman who was a social or political leader. These women expressed how operating as leaders had improved their family and community's conditions, oriented others to manage a project, find legal or social aid, and use their experience to favor others. 87% of men answered that they recognize women who were social or political in their communities. In San Luis de Paz, men acknowledged suffering some discrimination from their neighbors after supporting a woman leader. Finally, 100% of the attendees admitted the importance of women's right to vote and political participation.

Real-life Stories: Brave and Exemplary Women

Through the 50 interviews, we encountered lives marked by strong efforts, resilience, and aplomb¹⁴. By discussing their childhood, love relationships or labor difficulties, they could share their experiences, including obscure and difficult moments. It was gratifying to witness how self-confidence and physical, emotional, or economic support enabled them to go forward. Though we were not expecting this as an outcome for them to discover their inner renewal capability, we could observe they developed a new strengthened, confident, and bold view of themselves. Toward the end, we concluded that there were two variables present in all these women leaders: a strong character, full of the necessary impetus to question, propose, and deliver, and at least some circumstances that encouraged them to make crucial decisions. The correlation of both variables would be ideal. We urged governments, communities, and families to assume their responsibilities by creating this enabling environment for human development, particularly in rural villages:

Women in poor rural households are burdened with significant family subsistence responsibilities, and in many cases of female-headed households, they are sole economic providers. However, their ability to fulfil this responsibility is significantly constrained by the limited (and declining) resources and means at their command a constraint that stems not merely from their class position but also from gender (...) (Agarwal, 1989, p. 46).

¹⁴ We conducted 10 interviews in Aguascalientes, 16 in Estado de México, 5 in Guanajuato, 4 in Morelos and 15 in Puebla. The random of ages were between 19 and 66 years of age; 62% of them declared they were married at the time of the interview.

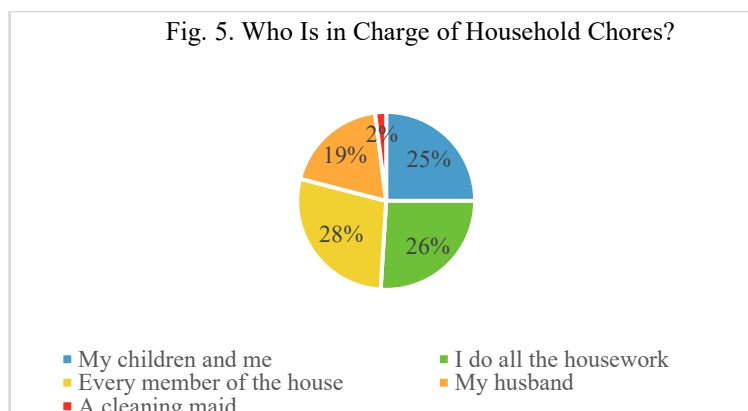
Most of the interviewed women were married (62%) and had completed the first grades of high school (42%). 16% of them had finished their professional studies, and one of them was studying for her master's degree. Only seven women identified themselves as Indigenous (Náhuatl and Mazahua); however, 2 of them confirmed that they could not speak their native language because their parents were ashamed of it and did not teach them.

As we had the objective of identifying the patterns that allow or impede women's empowerment, we worked with a semi-structured questionnaire. We adapted each interview to what women narrated during their storytelling. The 50 interviews needed to cover four specific themes: their origins and education, their family life, their economic sphere, and their social and political leadership. It was surprising how open and trustful they were with us. Based on some of their comments, we concluded that this attitude was mainly a result of the respect and recognition experienced during the research. The first way we approached them was by inquiring about their main reason for becoming a social and political leader. The most popular answer was "being able to help others", followed by to "stop being afraid and feeling insecure", and "necessity" in the third place.

Addressing their origins and education, 31 answered that they had positive memories from their childhoods. They discussed how close they were to their parents and how comforting and supportive their relatives were. Most of them spoke about a particular memory or experience of satisfaction they received by living with their family. Only 3 of them alluded to their childhoods as troublesome. Regarding living gender inequality, either in education, values, norms, or chores inside their families, 59% declared they did not experience significant differences. When we probed more about their family structure, many recognized they had economic problems; due to poverty, some of their relatives had died, abandoned them, or migrated. These last two scenarios were particularly disturbing as it meant they did not know about their relatives for a long time or ever again. Considering the answers, we concluded that it is unnecessary and unreal to set a perfect family environment in place for development, but what counts is experiencing the feeling of acceptance, unity, and solidarity. Many of them alluded to particular moments in their lives that led them to trust themselves; it could have been either having a leading role at a school festival or identifying the relevance of their family-related responsibilities. Others—five of them—were more specific about gaining trust while having a significant conversation with their grandfathers or fathers.

All of them recognized the importance of education; nevertheless, 61% explained that they could not continue studying after elementary school as they had no resources or nearby schools or were prevented by their responsibilities at home. In those cases, we got a sense of incompleteness which was verified by the fact that 98% would continue studying. When discussing their household dynamics, 91% of them assured they had support back home, as well as available networks. Though they affirmed experiencing an equal distribution of chores, 26% said they took care of everything. Being fair, three of these cases were because they lived alone. This brought us to the conclusion that women leaders delegate housework to have more time for personal, professional, religious, and social activities.

Fig. 5. Who Is in Charge of Household Chores?

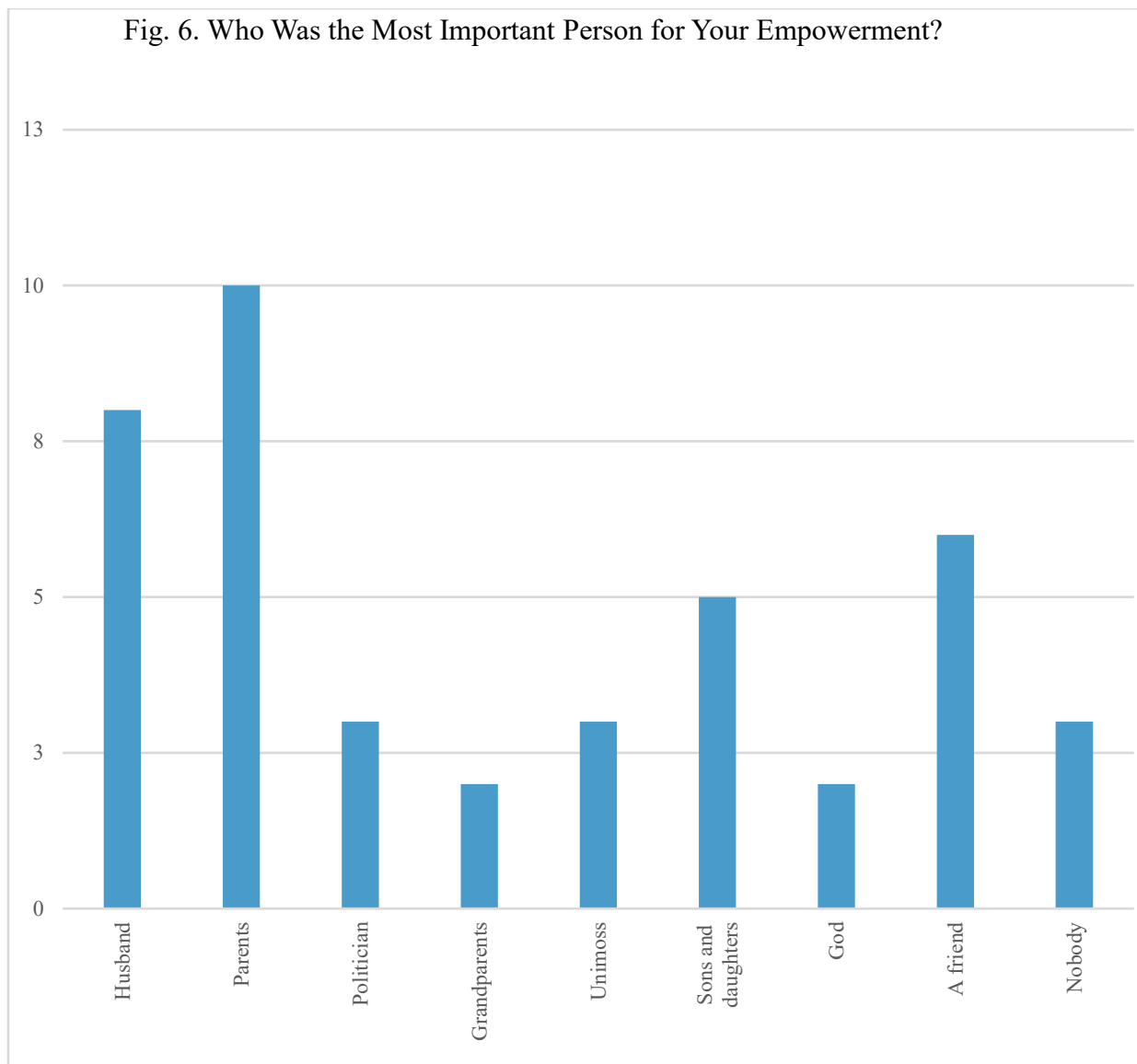


These women leaders shared with us the importance of their contribution to family income; for us, it was evidently related to their autonomy and development. Only 15% confirmed that their husbands were the only ones who earned a living, which meant 85% belonged to the economically active population. However, 57% of them had experienced gender disparities regarding salary, recruitment, or financial support.

Being acknowledged for their work was very important for them. Albeit, when we asked about their resting time, all of them were surprised, and some of them laughed at it. Proudly, 22% of them answered: "I never rest". Though we understood this as a proud attitude, it may also suggest a public health and economic problem due to burnout processes, recovery costs, and mental and physical stress.

Regarding the transformation of patriarchal mindsets, 89% confirmed that they had taken actions to support another woman's empowerment. For example, Imelda, who started selling corn in the street, now has a linen store where she encourages other women to start their own business. However, many of them had not heard about "gender perspective" or "empowerment" terms, so they could not clearly express the importance of what they do in terms of human development.

About the figures they recognized as more influential for the leadership processes, ten of them mentioned their parents, eight said it was their husbands, and six said a friend.



Finally, we asked the women leaders about their political participation. The majority showed interest in having a political career: 75% indicated interest in having a governmental position; meanwhile, the remaining 25% preferred social leadership as they felt free of any strain or political interests.

Conclusions: Challenges, Obstacles, and Opportunities for Women

To conclude, we will highlight three elements that summarize the outcome of our research. The first one is concerning the methodology, and the second one is the obstacles women identified. The third one is an analysis of what we found related to the Capabilities Approach.

First, it is important to recognize that organizing focus groups were not accidental. The methodology's selection was inspired by Sue Wilkinson's essay "How Useful are Focus Groups in Feminist Research" (1998). Her hypothesis is that this method allows for identifying the social context, avoiding individual isolation (which might be violent) and recreating the scenario where

participants may engage in the meaning generation (1998, p. 68-70). Sharing thoughts and stories collectively is a fundamental tool for constructing empathy and social recognition. One of the most pleasant experiences was determining how the spoken words conducted self-acknowledged in the participants and served as bridges to build solidarity within each community. We witnessed that through narration, a reconfiguration process based on solidarity, comprehension, and receptiveness occurred. While proceeding to encourage women to develop their capabilities and enable others in the same situation, many confessions appeared. The recollection of pleasant and unpleasant memories worked as catalysts for self-renewal.

On the other hand, the use of life histories recognized women as leaders and the source of the narrative tools for them to talk about their leadership. From the start, the interviewed women knew they were selected because their communities pointed them out as leaders. For social researchers, the narrative inquiry contributions show two things: the creativity, complexity, and variability of individuals, the self, reality, and the power of socio-historical circumstances (Beiras, Cantera, Espinosa and Casasanta, 2017). By allowing recognition of the self in relation to the context, it also permits for the subject to identify the relevance she or he has for the community. Either the focus groups or the interviews were coherent with our research paradigm; as explained before, we never intended to promote an agenda, but to provide the women with enough tools to be aware of how important they were for their community and to express what they thought was limiting their empowerment.

The following extracts enlighten what we mean when stating that the methodology supposed a self-recognition of these women as communitarian leaders. For example, Virginia's (all the last names were excluded to protect our participant's identities) testimony was an example of economic empowerment. Even if she grew in an impoverished context, she managed to earn her own money from a young age. She also acknowledged her ability to learn as much as possible:

My mother always told me: 'Where... where did you get that money from?', -she had me very well checked-, and I cleared for her: 'No, *mami*, I made a cake with the cream leftovers we had in a jar. I put milk in hot water to curd it. I strained it well and prepared butter because this is what they taught us at school'. -I used to absorbed everything I could to learn-. I made my butter, and I made a cake, and then I sold it.

Other stories narrated how they observed their community's needs and, while addressing them, they found a business opportunity. María Luisa's story is an excellent example of this. She described how buying a tortilla mill had changed her life. She mills corn kernels to make tortillas. She is the only one in her community who has a mill; thus, she offers this service to others for a fee. Now, she knows that if she saves the money from milling corn, she can buy a grocery store which, according to her, would make her happy. Though capitalization is not the answer to inequality, in countries like Mexico, earning their own money translates into autonomy.

The recognition of the importance of communitarian supports was also crucial in their stories. May it be the support they received, or the support they give to others, to understand their leadership this was fundamental. María del Carmen told us how having the help of her boss changed her life: "I had a boss, a notary, may he rest in peace, who helped me. He paid for my studies while I was working for him. He told me 'if you score a 90, I will pay for half of your tuition. If you get a 95, I pay 75%, and if you get a 100, I will pay 100% of your fees'. It was hard, but I did it." Meanwhile, María de Jesús spoke proudly about how she helps other women to

empower themselves: "I speak to them about my project and tell them how we can do it together (...) I like to hear them talk. Even in bad times, I say 'put your will to it', 'do this or that'. We can affirm that Maria Jesús was admired and respected in her community.

It was astonishing to observe how, after spending the entire day in dynamics of listening and recognition, a person could find new and meaningful goals to commit with a new set of values oriented towards justice and equality. Self-awareness was raised by what they "really can be or do", and the quality of agency surfaced in other women. We could also register the enormous capability to care for each other and the vital role that resilience has to increase human potential.

Secondly, it is important to mention the obstacles. As women told their stories or shared their day-to-day activities, they were able to identify the challenges they face. Through their narration, we identified the main obstacles for grassroots women's empowerment as the following:

- Lack of time to participate in transcendent activities
- Absence of family support
- Socio-economic disparities
- Lack of self-esteem

Meanwhile, we observed that the main challenges that prevented their empowerment were:

- Gender stereotypes in everyday life
- Teenage pregnancy
- Spousal immigration
- Loneliness
- The presence of fear
- Being the only one economically responsible for the family
- Lack of tools for assertive decision-making

On the other hand, we could also appreciate some opportunities that suggested that the context might be different for future generations:

- Solidarity among the communities
- Stronger family bonds
- An exponential increase of empowered women
- A change in gender-based rules of engagement for the younger generation
- Family dynamics with better distribution of chores

We could identify the following main obstacles for women's empowerment in rural surroundings:

- Lack of time to participate in transcendent activities
- Absence of family support
- Socio-economic disparities
- Lack of self-esteem

Based on the data obtained through the focus groups, we could appreciate that, despite the traditional gender-roles, there has been a social change, especially among the younger generation. During the men's focus groups, we observed an inspiring phenomenon regarding the advance of

gender equality. Although they felt threatened by women's empowerment when it referred to their partners or wives, most men hoped for more advantages and improved conditions for their daughters. After the research, we confirmed the relevance of new forms of masculinity, thinking about male agents' formation that support gender equality.

Third and finally, since we believe that the purpose of philosophy is to make insights for everyone, we bet for the Capabilities Approach as it may enable women to own their decisions and improve their life quality. As Ibrahim (2014) did, we appreciated the same outcome that results from applying the Capabilities Approach into a communitarian context. Women were provided with a sense of self-fulfillment (2014, p. 59). Women and men have an enormous capacity to change their conditions if we promote critical thinking and self-understanding. As seen in the examples, after the discussions, women recognized themselves as leaders and understood how important they were for their community.

Furthermore, we can corroborate the multiplicative effect of changing mindsets to have enhanced equity. The testimonies obtained, focus groups, and indicators demonstrated how adaptive preferences are shaped through education, in the family and the community. Our intervention did not suppose bringing or imposing an agenda; moreover, it was a recognition of what they already had. It only considered the “enable to gain more skills, for example communication or advocacy skills” (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 60). After sharing their stories with us, they felt more confident about how they shaped their families and everyone around them.

Additionally, the support given in a crucial moment for each of the identified women leaders made a substantive change in their perspectives. They became aware of their communitarian problems and roles (Ibrahim, 2014, p. 60) and what they already have to solve them. By confirming their agency, “people need a sense of agency to achieve their livelihood outcomes” (Sharaunga et al, 2018, p. 4). In most instances, we can affirm that the effects were positive for women and their community.

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